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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern, and further actions and initiatives; priority theme: "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges"

Statement submitted by International Federation of Social Workers, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The International Federation of Social Workers supports the theme of rural women for the fifty-sixth session of the Commission on the Status of Women. The Federation is a global federation of social-work organizations, representing more than 500,000 members worldwide (see www.ifsw.org). The goal is to promote the practice of social work based on social-justice principles. The emphasis on economic and social development for rural women is especially relevant to the Federation, as social workers all over the world work to advance and empower rural women.

The Federation supports the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Millennium Development Goals, which set out clear goals and guidelines to promote women's advancement and gender mainstreaming in all aspects of international development. The Federation is also committed to advancing women's rights within a human rights framework, as laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979), which 187 nations have ratified to date.

The Federation supports the Commission in addressing rural women as an especially vulnerable subset of women globally. The Federation also works to promote the accomplishments and empowerment of rural women in eradicating poverty and promoting development.

Challenges

Poverty, land rights and food insecurity

Two thirds of the world's 1.4 billion people, who live in extreme poverty, reside in rural areas of developing nations, according to the International Fund for Agricultural Development. The current global recession has had the greatest impact on poor rural families. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), when faced with a food crisis, poor rural women are forced to choose between purchasing food and sending their children to school or paying for an elderly relative's health expenses. Rural women are forced to work more and eat less nutritious food. They often go hungry to ensure that their children and husbands eat.

According to FAO, gender disparity in terms of access to land is a leading cause of social inequality Although women are major contributors to the agricultural labour force and produce more than half of the foodstuffs in many places around the world, they own less than 2 per cent of the world's land. Women also have less access to income from the land, less agricultural training and less access to credit that would enable them to develop their land. Combined, these factors leave rural women vulnerable to poverty and malnutrition. In addition, rural women are often most vulnerable to the negative effects of environmental degradation and climate change.

Education

According to figures provided by the United Nations Children's Fund in 2010, more than half of the estimated 101 million children worldwide who are not enrolled in school are girls. Gender inequality in terms of education and illiteracy

disproportionately affects rural women around the globe. Yet education could enhance the quality of life for rural women and girls, as it allows for the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in a global economy, as well as having a positive impact on families and communities.

National disasters, wars and disease often prevent women and girls from pursuing an education. The need to travel great distances to schools and lack of public transportation are other barriers to education for rural women. Primary education can protect rural women from HIV, human trafficking and other forms of exploitation, according to data provided in 2010 by World Education, and empower them to rise out of poverty.

Health

As reflected in the Millennium Development Goals, improving maternal health is extremely vital to the advancement of society. Gaining access to quality health-care facilities is an immense challenge for rural women. Today, more than 15 million women are living with HIV and approximately 530,000 women die each year during pregnancy or childbirth, according to information provided in 2010 by Zonta International. Initiatives to prevent mother-to-child transmission of AIDS, as well as the creation of basic health services and the education of women on health-related issues, have improved, yet there is still more to be accomplished.

Rural women are vulnerable to health complications such as maternal and neonatal tetanus and obstetric fistula. Each year, according to the World Health Organization, between 50,000 and 100,000 women worldwide are affected by obstetric fistula, which is one of the major causes of maternal mortality. Those who survive obstetric fistula experience shame, social segregation and health problems. This condition can be avoided through education about maternal health and access to obstetric care.

Access to appropriate health-care services and education is vital to the livelihoods of rural women. Because of regional isolation, women are forced to travel for miles to the nearest doctor or hospital. This can be life-threatening when there are birth complications and a need for surgical interventions. Medical professionals are often not able to travel through war-torn areas to provide health care to rural women in their own communities.

Violence

Forms of gender-based violence, including rape, sexual slavery, human trafficking, forced pregnancy and other abuses, are considered human rights violations and crimes against humanity. Violence against women takes many forms and is an epidemic that affects women in all nations. The psychological and physical health of the survivor is compromised, as well as the well-being of families and communities.

Women and girls from rural communities suffer from violence within and outside their homes. In 2011, the World Health Organization has estimated that the prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence by a partner ranges from 30 to 60 per cent, reaching as high as 71 per cent in rural Ethiopia. Abuse against rural women is often unreported and not appropriately documented; therefore, its actual incidence around the world may be much higher.

Summary and recommendations

Rural women's experiences are diverse and must be examined within each unique geographical and cultural context. Despite overwhelming challenges, rural women of the world are leaders in their communities and contribute in significant ways to the well-being of society. They work as teachers, healers, agricultural workers, artists, community organizers, caretakers, activists and spiritual leaders. Rural women possess traditional knowledge that is invaluable for sustainable development, and care for the Earth. They are actively working to improve their own financial security through savings groups, cooperatives and small businesses. Rural women are empowering themselves to improve the lives of women everywhere.

The International Federation of Social Workers is deeply committed to creating a world in which all women and girls are protected from harm and provided with equal opportunities. Ultimately, it will take an international collaborative effort of United Nations agencies, Governments, civil society, non-governmental organizations and other key stakeholders to reduce the economic and social challenges faced by rural women.

The Federation makes the following recommendations:

- A higher degree of advocacy must be promoted within sovereign states to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other United Nations conventions that affect rural women;
- Since international mandates are often not implemented, even within signatory countries, national laws that promote women's rights need to be adopted and enforced;
- The international community should work towards increased education and skills training for rural women and girls who need access to technology and new technical knowledge concerning agricultural methods;
- Enhancement in health-care services and accessibility to health facilities for rural women should be addressed globally as a priority;
- Violence against women and girls should be addressed through collaborative partnerships between Governments, communities and civil society. Policy development, reform and implementation are imperative to eradicate violence against rural women;
- Greater emphasis should be placed on rural women's full participation in the creation of solutions to social problems and in all decision-making that affects their lives. Article 14 of the Convention affirms the importance of such participation in all aspects of policy development and implementation at the community, national and international levels. The international community must look to rural women and their unique knowledge, including with regard to successful microfinancing initiatives;
- Solutions must be analysed and implemented from within the context of interconnected familial and community systems. Any solution that limits social change to Government and external corporate actors will be ineffective;
- International social development needs to be understood as a culturally sensitive process. Development workers and advocates must be culturally competent in addressing gender inequality issues around the world.